

IN CONFIDENCE
GENETICALLY MODIFIED CROPS IN AUSTRALIA

QUESTION

- What is the benefit of genetically modified crops; and what measures does Australia have in place to ensure the safety of genetically modified crops and genetically modified food?

TALKING POINTS

- Biotechnology, including the development of genetically modified crops, can assist in increasing agricultural productivity in the face of climate change, resource constraints and the pressures of providing a secure food supply.
- Foods from approved genetically modified crops have been consumed since genetically modified crops were first grown commercially in six countries in 1996, including the United States.
- ABARE released two reports in 2008 which found that genetic modification of crops is delivering significant cost savings to farmers in other countries.
- Australian growers could lose significant market share if their access to genetically modified crop technology is restricted.
- Genetically modified crops can benefit the environment by changing the way farmers manage their crops.
- The intentional release of a genetically modified organism into the Australian environment, such as a genetically modified crop, must be licensed by the Gene Technology Regulator, an independent statutory office holder within the Health portfolio. The license will only be issued if risks can be managed so as to protect the health and safety of people and the environment.

BACKGROUND

- Concerns with genetically modified crops and food raised by the farming and general community often relate to: the adequacy of Australia's regulatory and food labelling systems; environmental impacts, loss of market access; impact

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on organic crop production; legal liability to farmers of non-genetically modified crops and technology providers; and the capture of the Australian agricultural sector by multi-nationals.

- The Minister for Health and Ageing has the lead Australian Government responsibility for the regulation of genetically modified organisms and genetically modified foods.
- Gene technology is regulated under a nationally consistent regulatory scheme by the Gene Technology Regulator in accordance with *the Gene Technology Act 2000*. The Regulator has approved commercial release of several varieties of cotton, canola, carnations and a rose; and has issued licences for field trials of crops as diverse as sugarcane, wheat and barley, pineapple, white clover and grapevines, as well as the ornamental plant, torenia.
- Decisions on whether to allow genetically modified crop production in part or all of a state or territory are a matter for that jurisdiction.
- In 2010, nearly 133,330 hectares of genetically modified canola was planted in Australia. This is the third year genetically modified canola can be grown commercially in New South Wales (24,040 hectares) and Victoria (36,500 hectares). It is the first year genetically modified canola can be grown commercially in Western Australia (72,790 hectares).
- Tasmania has a moratorium on the commercial release of genetically modified organisms until 2014. In 2008 the South Australian government extended its moratorium on GM food crops indefinitely.
- Food Standards Australia New Zealand administers the regulation and labelling of genetically modified foods and ingredients and assesses all genetically modified foods for human consumption on a case by case basis. More than 40 genetically modified foods have been approved. Food Standards Australia New Zealand will not approve a genetically modified food for sale or use if there is evidence it would pose public health and safety concerns.

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- Genetically modified foods are required to be labelled in accordance with the Australia New Zealand Food Standards Code, enabling consumers to make informed choices about what they eat.
- Scientific evidence indicates that feeding genetically modified plant material to livestock does not affect the nutritional value or safety of the meat, milk and eggs derived from those animals. As these food products are not genetically modified, they are not required to be labelled as genetically modified.

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NOT FOR PUBLIC RELEASE – OTHER INFORMATION

- In late September 2010 Greenpeace and the media reported trace amounts of genetically modified soy and corn had been found in S-26 Soy infant formula, despite the product not being labelled as containing genetically modified ingredients. Following these reports, Senator Siewert and Senator Xenophon moved to discuss the labelling of genetically modified foods when the Senate next sits (25 October 2010).

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